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The Correlation between Teacher Trainers' and Pre-service Teachers' Perceptions of Autonomy

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Abstract

Autonomy has been a very popular subject in language learning as of late. It can be defined as taking responsibility for one's own learning, as an ability to take charge of one's own learning (Holec, 1981), as a personal agenda for learning (Little, 1991) or awareness in language (Lier, 1996) and as the learner's willingness and capacity to control or oversee her own learning (Dam, 1990). People are qualified as autonomous when they independently choose aims and purposes and set goals; select materials, methods and tasks; exercise choice and purpose in organising and carrying out the chosen tasks; and set up criteria for evaluation. That is why the main aim of this study is to investigate the correlation between teachers' and pre-service teachers' perspectives of autonomy and to explore these perspectives by asking primarily what teachers' views of their roles and responsibilities are in language learning/teaching; secondly what they think of the roles of the students; thirdly, which opinions and evidence teachers have of their students' autonomous learning; fourthly, what teachers' attitudes are towards activities, both inside and outside the classroom, which are thought to help in the autonomy development; fifthly what teachers' and pre-service teachers' interpretations are of learner autonomy; sixthly what they think of the teacher autonomy and finally whether teachers believe the course curriculum helps or hinders the development of learner autonomy. 10 teachers and 60 pre-service teachers at the Faculty of Education participated in the study and they were administered the semi-structured interview and the questionnaire by Camilleri (1997). The results show that there is a correlation between the teacher trainers' and pre-service teachers' perceptions of learner autonomy, however, they have different perspectives in terms of teacher autonomy.

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1. Introduction

Autonomy can be defined as taking responsibility for one's own learning, as an ability to take charge of one's own learning (Holec, 1981). As is seen, the word "autonomy" encapsulates the desirable characteristics of learners. An autonomous learner is someone who:

- has a consistency that derives from a coherent set of beliefs, values, and principles
- engages in a continuing process of criticism and re-evaluation
- is obedient to a law that he prescribes to himself
- has insights into their learning styles and strategies
- takes an active approach to the learning task at hand
- is willing to take risks to communicate in the target language at all costs
- is a good guesser
- attends to form as well as to content and gives importance on accuracy as well as appropriacy
- develops the target language into a separate reference system
- is willing to revise and reject hypotheses and rules that do not apply
- has a tolerant and outgoing approach to the target language (Omaggio, 1978, cited in Wenden, 1998, pp. 41-42).

Learner autonomy holds that if students are involved in decision making processes regarding their own language competence, "they are likely to be more enthusiastic about learning" (Littlejohn, 1985, p. 258) and learning can be more focused and purposeful for them (Little, 1991; Dam, 1995; Camilleri, 1997) by showing that "learners have the power and right to learn for themselves" (Smith, 2008, p.2). Meanwhile, There is an important role for teachers in this process since 'the ability to behave autonomously for students is dependent upon their teacher creating a classroom culture where autonomy is accepted' (Barfield et al. 2001, p. 3)

If we wish to use autonomy not only for learners but also for teachers, De Vries and Kohlberg (1987, p. 380) give a picture of what an autonomous teacher looks like.

The autonomous constructivist teacher knows not only what to do, but why. She has a solid network of convictions that are both practical and theoretical. The autonomous teacher can think about how children are thinking and at the same time think about how to intervene to promote the constructive culture. Autonomous teachers do not just accept uncritically what curriculum specialists give them. They think about whether they agree with what is suggested. They take responsibility for the education they are offering children.

Learner autonomy depends on teacher autonomy in two senses: it is unreasonable to expect teachers to foster the growth of autonomy in their learners if they themselves do not know what it is to be an autonomous learner. In determining the initiatives they take in their classrooms, teachers must be able to apply to their teaching those same reflective and self-managing processes that they apply to their learning (Little 1995, p. 175).

Autonomy support is the interpersonal behavior teachers provide during instruction to identify, nurture, and build students' inner motivational resources (Reeve, Deci, & Ryan, 2004). Thus, autonomy support concerns an atmosphere where students are not pressured to behave in a specific way, and where they are instead endorsed to be themselves (Ryan & Deci, 2004).

Investigating teachers' beliefs of learner autonomy is extremely important as it is difficult to implement learner autonomy practices in the classroom if teachers are not exposed to the principles of learner autonomy. Fundamental to bringing more autonomy into classrooms are teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning (Lamb, 2008, Balçıkanlı, 2010). Learner autonomy is an interdependent relationship where the subject of learning, in our case a foreign or second language, is placed between teacher and learner. It is in this space that the teacher helps the learner develop his or her ability to make choices in their learning.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

10 university teachers and 60 pre-service teachers at the Faculty of Education participated in the study and both groups were administered the questionnaire designed by Camilleri (1997) and the semi-structured interview involving the questions below:

- what are your views on the learner responsibilities in language learning/teaching?
- what do you think of the roles of the learners?
- what are your attitudes towards activities, both inside and outside the classroom?
- do you believe the course curriculum helps or hinders the development of learner autonomy?

2.2. Procedure

As part of a larger study, participants were recruited from the English Language Education department of the Faculty of Education. Third year students were chosen for the questionnaire and interview as they take the maximum number of methodology classes. In the classroom, the researcher explained to the students the reasons for the study and informed them that participation was voluntary and confidential, to avoid the possible effect of social desirability. At the same time, she urged them to complete the questionnaires as honestly as possible and to think of a particular instructor and classroom environment when indicating perceived autonomy support and she provided the students with the necessary support to successfully complete the questionnaires. Items were administered by the same person at all testing sessions to standardize the procedure and help ensure consistency. The time needed by the participants to complete the instruments and answer the semi-structured interviews was approximately 15 min. For the in-service teachers, the data was collected online.

2.3. Instrumentation

For the study Camilleri's questionnaire is used with a three-point Likert system: "Little" refers to the resistance to autonomy and "a lot" refers to the strong support of autonomy "partly" is about the negotiation between teacher and learner. The reliability is tested again for the Turkish context and found to be, 86.

3. Results

The results yield some interesting insight into what teachers and students consider to be the learners' roles in establishing the objectives, topics, materials, activities, learning tasks and assessments. Meanwhile almost all students desire to have a say in the assessment, they think the choices of topics, materials and tasks should be borne on the teachers as shown in Table 1. Most teachers believe in the shared responsibility, however, in establishing the objectives, and topics, they believe they could share this with the students should be the main decision makers. Pre-service teachers, on the other hand, respond to the items by saying "partly", indicating that teachers know better. However, in terms of the activities and pace of the lesson, they wish to have a say (70%) and they definitely believe that they should discover the rules by themselves. It is unusual to see that they need teachers' encouragement for self-testing (80%).

Table 1 Selection of materials, topics and assessment

Items	Little		Partly		A lot	
	T	P	T	P	T	P
1. How much should the learner be involved in establishing the objectives of a course of study?	10	20	60	80	20	
2. How much should the learner be involved in deciding the course topics and content?	30	30	70	70		
3. How much should the learner be involved in selecting materials?	20	10	60	90	20	
4. How much should the learner be involved in the time, place and pace of the lesson?			25	100	70	
5. How much should the learner be involved in the activities of the lesson?		30	30	70	70	
6. How much should the learner be involved in decisions on the choice of learning tasks?	30	100	70			
7. How much should the learner be involved in decisions on classroom management (discipline matters)?	40		60	100		
8. How much should the learner be involved in decisions on homework tasks?	45		55	100		
9. How much should the learner be involved in decisions on what is to be learned from materials given by the teacher?	20	40	80	60		
10. How much should the learner be encouraged to find his or her own explanations to classroom tasks?		60	30	40	70	
11. How much should the learner be encouraged to assess himself or herself, rather than be tested?	100		20		80	

During the semi-structured interview, the first question posed to teachers and students is the learner responsibilities in language learning/teaching. Students are reluctant to select topics, tasks and activities but they enjoy the idea of assessing themselves.

Table 2 The learner responsibilities in language learning/teaching

	Teachers %	Pre-service teachers %
Selecting materials	80	50
Selecting topics	70	50
Selecting tasks	80	20
Selecting activities	90	70
Selecting assessment	70	50

When asked about learner roles, teachers have higher scores than pre-service teachers. Pre-service teachers believe the teacher is the participant (100%) whereas in-service teachers think learners can be the decision makers and participants (100 %).

Table 3 The learner roles in language learning/teaching

	Teachers %	Pre-service teachers %
Participant	100	70
Decision maker	100	20
Assessor	40	75
Listener	-	100

In terms of the curricular and extracurricular activities, in-service teachers support the activities and pre-service teachers are impartial in Table 4.

Table 4 Attitudes towards activities, both inside and outside the classroom

	Teachers %	Pre-service teachers %
Positive	100	50
Impartial	-	50
Negative	-	-

In-service teachers believe the curriculum hinders learner autonomy (75%) whereas pre-service teachers have no idea about the impact of the curriculum on learner autonomy (50%) in Table 5.

Table 5 The course curriculum's help or hindrance of the development of learner autonomy

	Teachers %	Pre-service teachers %
Helps	25	20
Hinders	75	30
No idea	-	50

4. Conclusion

Developing learner autonomy is a gradual process. It is a process in which both teacher and learner are involved, and it must move at a pace that both can manage (Camilleri, 1997). There is no 'one size fits all' approach to learner autonomy (Smith, 2003a, p. 256).

As mentioned, the role of the teacher is central to the development of learner autonomy (Benson, 2008). The teacher will need to create a classroom learning environment that is supportive of learner autonomy. This may involve the teacher first addressing learners' past learning experiences, then slowly raising their awareness to the benefits of increased independence in their learning. Teachers may also need to address their own beliefs about teaching and perspectives of learner autonomy. If not, the teacher could, intentionally or unintentionally, constrain learner autonomy in the classroom 'leading to a lack of authenticity in learning which can disconnect it from real life' (Lamb, 2008, p. 273).

There have been a number of other justifications for promoting learner autonomy that have been put forward:

1. Autonomous learning helps learners become critically and socially aware members of their own lives and of those around them (Benson, 1995).
2. Learner autonomy increases motivation which, in turn, increases learning effectiveness (Dickinson, 1995; Little, 2002).

3. Encouraging and active approach to learning helps develop the ability to think and act interdependently which will allow learners to ‘play active, participatory roles in a democratic society’ (Benson, 2006, p. 31).

4. Learners spend more time outside the classroom than inside and it is important to prepare learners for the various learning opportunities that exist for them outside the school walls (Field, 2007).

5. Learner autonomy addresses the differences in learning styles and preferences of learners (Reinders, 2010).

6. Learners need the ability to function independently as they may not always have access to teacher and institutional support (e.g. academic studies in mainstream university classes) (Cotterall 1995; Palfreyman 2003; Little, 2009).

In autonomous learning, learners and teachers are partners in the learning process. The teacher is the learning expert, and the learner is the expert on him/herself. The development of learner autonomy is a complex process and the teacher must not expect instant results. Autonomous learning must be graded very carefully. The teacher who accepts responsibility for providing an environment that helps students learn how to learn more effectively faces no easy task. It is a responsibility of a high order, one with much potential for rewards for both teacher and learner. Together they will need to feel their way and to take some risks. Eventually both will be able to share in the satisfactions that their persistence will almost surely bring.

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